John Czekalski

Belonging in South Africa: Nationality, Race and Religion in J.M. Coetzee's "Boyhood"[1]

Institute of Oriental Studies, Jagiellonian University

Almost inevitably as part of the process of story-telling […] the White child-narrator will be confronted with the evils of apartheid, and will find himself or herself at the threshold of a profoundly life-changing decision – the rejection of all they have always associated with home, with family, with nation and with self.[2]

Introduction

John Maxwell Coetzee's *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life*, the first in a series of three fictionalised autobiographies published by the author, focuses on the childhood of John Coetzee (from the ages of 10 to 13), a boy growing up in mid-20th century Worcester, South Africa. If there is one description that least accurately describes the childhood portrayed in the memoir, it can, as the author himself points out, be found in the *Children's Encyclopaedia*:

> Childhood, says the *Children's Encyclopaedia*, is a time of innocent joy, to be spent in the meadows amid buttercups and bunny-rabbits or at the hearthside absorbed in a storybook. It is a vision of childhood utterly alien to him. Nothing he experiences in Worcester, at home or at school, leads him to think that childhood is anything but a time of gritting the teeth and enduring.[3]

Rather than "innocent joy", the predominant characteristic that resonates throughout the boy's childhood appears to be that of exclusion. The narrator fre-

1 The article is partially based on research conducted for the author's MA thesis, entitled "Flirting with Autobiography. Visions of Boyhood in J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and Michael Ondaatje's *The Cat's Table*" written under the supervision of dr Robert Kusek, and defended at the Institute of English Philology, Jagiellonian University in Krakow, in June 2014.

2 T. Simoes da Silva, *Narrating a White Africa: Autobiography, Race and History*, "Third World Quarterly", 2005, Vol. 26, No. 3, p. 472.

3 .M., Coetzee, *Boyhood. Scenes from Provincial Life*, Secker & Warburg, London 1997, p. 14.

quently describes him as an outcast, emotionally damaged and persevering in the face of surroundings that consistently reject him:

> He has a sense that he is damaged. He has a sense that something is slowly tearing inside him all the time: a wall, a membrane. He tries to hold himself as tight as possible to keep the tearing within bounds. To keep it within bounds, not to stop it: nothing will stop it.[4]

This theme of abnormality and inner conflict is often repeated within the context of the novel. But why doesn't the boy belong? According to the protagonist, his alienation is a result of his parents' actions and many of the boy's feelings of estrangement appear to have roots in his upbringing. Within his family "[he] is on his own. From no quarter can he expect support."[5] Throughout the novel, he views his parents as highly unorthodox and comes to the conclusion that they are to blame for his exclusion among his peers. As stated by the narrator, "[…] he is unnatural and he knows it. He comes from an unnatural […] family."[6] He cannot understand why he belongs to a "shameful family in which not only are children not beaten but older people are addressed by their first names and no one goes to church and shoes are worn every day"[7]. And so, for instance, because he is not beaten at home, the boy is terrified of being punished at school – the disgrace of the spectacle is far greater than the pain. Ultimately, public beating becomes a rite of passage that he ought to go through (but never does) in order to belong:

> The strange thing is, it will only take one beating to break the spell of terror that has him in its grip. He is well aware of this: if, somehow, he can be rushed through the beating before he has had time to turn to stone or resist, if the violation of his body can be achieved quickly, by force, he will be able to come out on the other side a normal boy, able to join easily in discussion of the teachers and their canes and the various grades and flavours of pain they inflict. But by himself he cannot leap the barrier.[8]

However, I believe that there are three additional, key factors that are responsible for the rift between John and South African society; factors that the boy is not yet aware of. These are, respectively, the racial segregation resulting from the Apartheid politics of the National Party, the boy's rejection of his South African heritage as a result of his distaste towards the distorted history of the country taught to him at school and, finally, his secular worldview, incompatible with the predominantly devout, Christian beliefs held by society. It is the purpose of this article to explore these issues, and their alienating impact on John's life, in greater detail.

4 Ibidem, p. 9.

5 Ibidem, p. 13.

6 Ibidem, p. 6.

7 Ibidem.

8 Ibidem, p. 7.

Nationality

Coetzee's protagonist appears to vehemently reject the South Africa described to him at school, or, as he calls it, the "country without heroes"[9]. From highly aggressive comments ("He is relieved he is not Afrikaans and is saved from having to talk like that, like a whipped slave"[10]) to more thoughtful passages on the nature of patriotism ("Why should he not be free to choose between Toweel and Ortiz in boxing […]. Do South Africans have to support other South Africans […]?"[11]), the author highlights the boy's rebellious thoughts and his innocent, concealed attraction towards an idealised vision of Britain. It appears that as a child Coetzee most probably "thought of himself as English because his family spoke English at home, although his last name is of Boer origin and his father is more Boer than English"[12]. Perhaps this attraction also stems from the lack of available South African literature at the time; Van der Vlies notes that in the relationship between South African and British textual productions the book "has been central to processes by which South Africa has always defined itself in relation to an elsewhere"[13]. Oblivious to Britain's "subjugation and exploitation of indigenous South Africans"[14], he is seduced by the country's vivid history. Here the boy finds role models that the South Africa he has come to know at school clearly lacks:

> He cannot understand why it is that so many people around him dislike England. England is Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain. England is doing one's duty and accepting one's fate in a quiet, unfussy way. England is the boy at the battle of Jutland, who stood by his guns while the deck was burning under him. England is Sir Lancelot of the Lake and Richard the Lionheart and Robin Hood with his longbow of yew and his suit of Lincoln green What do the Afrikaaners have to compare?[15]

Since "propaganda was typical of the National Party narrative at the time, [as was] the suppression and misinformation about South Africa's rich prehistory and subsequent volatile colonial history"[16], the appeal of Britain's vast array of historical and mythological narratives comes as no surprise. In contrast, he despises his Afrikaans heritage. He has no interest in supposedly heroic figures such as Jan van Riebeeck, the founder of colonial Cape Town, who, as stated by president Thabo Mbeki,

9 Ibidem, p. 108.

10 Ibidem, p. 49.

11 Ibidem, p. 109.

12 H. Leusmann, *J.M. Coetzee's Cultural Critique*, "World Literature Today", Sep. – Dec. 2004, Vol. 78, No. 3, p. 60.

13 A. Van der Vlies, *South African Textual Studies. White, Black, Read All Over*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2007, p. 2.

14 L. Meskell, L. Weiss, *Coetzee on South Africa's Past. Remembering in the Time of Forgetting*, "American Anthropologist," Mar. 2008, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 90.

15 J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood*..., p. 128.

16 L. Meskell and L. Weiss, op. cit., p. 93.

planted "a hedge of almond and thorn- bush [...] to ensure the safety of the white European settlers by keeping the menacing black African hordes of primitive pagans at bay"[17] – an event which marked the onset of colonial and racial oppression in South Africa. This distaste towards the Dutch colonisers continues into the boy's later life, as can be seen in Coetzee's second semi-autobiographical novel, *Youth*. In this text, John, as a young adult, places national literatures in a hierarchy, where "of all nations the Dutch are the dullest, the most antipoetic"[18]. The boy despises Afrikaners and claims that they are "in a rage all the time because their hearts are hurt"[19]. Conversely, the English, heroic as always, "have not fallen into rage because they live behind walls and guard their hearts well"[20]. At the thought of being transferred to an Afrikaans class because of his surname, he is filled with panic, lives in a state of continuous dread[21]. He has come to hate Afrikaans songs so much "that he wants to scream and shout and make farting noises during the singing"[22]. The mere thought of being turned into an Afrikaans boy, "with shaven head and no shoes, makes him quail. It is like being sent to prison, to a life with no privacy."[23] In short, the boy has a transnational sense of identity; his views constitute the complete opposite of nationalism, if defined as "the adoration of nation, making people from the same community believe they are related to each other and enforcing their feelings of being connected […]"[24]. He rejects his Afrikaans heritage and longs to be British; however, he is aware that he can never fully belong to or completely erase his ties with either group. Coetzee remarks that the boy will remain in a state of flux, neither Afrikaans nor English – there are "tests to face, some of which he knows he will not pass"[25]. In terms of cultural identity, John can be categorized as being in an 'in-between' space in society[26]. His struggle continues in *Youth*: "He would prefer to leave his South African self behind as he has left South Africa itself behind. South Africa was a bad start, a handicap."[27] As before, although years have passed and John has moved to London and partially transitioned into English society, he cannot entirely escape his South African self.

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17 L. Witz, *Apartheid's Festival. Contesting South Africa's National Pasts*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, p. 253.

18 J.M. Coetzee, *Youth*, Secker and Warburg, London 2001, p. 77.

19 J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood*…, p. 73.

20 Ibidem.

21 Cf. Ibidem, p. 69.

22 Ibidem, p. 70.

23 Ibidem, p. 126.

24 G. Jusdanis, *The Necessary Nation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001.

25 J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood*…, p. 129.

26 Cf. H.K. Bhabha, *Locations of Culture. The Post-colonial and the Postmodern*, [in:] *Postmodern Debates*, ed. Simon Malpas, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, p. 136.

27 J.M. Coetzee, *Youth*, p. 62.

Race

Being part of a racial minority also contributes to these feelings of solitude – John is white in a predominantly Black African and Coloured society. He is also part of a tiny English-speaking minority ("Aside from himself and his brother, who are English only in a way, there are only two English boys […]"[28]). The boy appears to be confused by the racial stereotyping of Coloured people he observes in adults. He notices his mother's awkward behaviour and contradictory statements. In the Coetzee's house Coloured men are always hired to conduct repairs around the house because "they are used to working with their hands […], because they have no book-learning"[29]. However, as the repairmen repeatedly fail to perform their tasks correctly, his mother's opinion does not alter – a clear remnant of "the racialized ideologies forged during colonial rule"[30]. Additionally, she states that "Coloured people are the salt of the earth […], yet she and her sisters are always gossiping about pretend-whites with secret Coloured backgrounds"[31]. Racial discrimination of this type can be directly linked to the apartheid system, but its roots can be traced further into the past.

Many of these feelings result from the policy of segregation introduced in the years following the Union of South Africa (1910) and preceding the institution of apartheid in 1948[32]. The policy, implemented to varying degrees throughout the new country, "generally separated races to the benefit of those of European descent and to the detriment of those of African descent"[33] and was, importantly, an explicit, legally enforced form of discrimination "implemented through a series of laws […] which were often enforced with great brutality"[34]. Although sometimes viewed as less severe than apartheid, segregation was to have a lasting impact on South African society; its consequences still noticeable in the 21st century[35], as evidenced by for example the violent, xenophobic anti-immigrant riots that swept through the country in May 2008 and left over sixty people dead and thousands homeless[36].

However, even if Coetzee portrays the realities of apartheid in "a clear and uncompromising light that makes sure no traces of injury and destruction can escape"[37], *Boyhood*'s protagonist has no discernible knowledge of these political events and so

28 J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood*…, p. 67.

29 Ibidem, p. 37.

30 L. Meskell, L. Weiss, op. cit., p. 89.

31 J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood*…, p. 37.

32 Cf. N. Clark and W. Worger, *South Africa. The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, Pearson Education Limited, Harlow 2004, p. 21.

33 Ibidem.

34 Ibidem.

35 Cf. Ibidem.

36 Cf. A. Mosselson, "*There is no difference between citizens and non-citizens anymore". Violent Xenophobia, Citizenship and the Politics of Belonging in Post-Apartheid South Africa,* "Journal of Southern African Studies," Sept. 2010, Vol. 36, No. 3, p. 642.

37 H. Leusmann, op. cit., p. 60.

he is invariably confused by the racial oppression so prevalent in South African society. Unlike those around him, he finds his supposed racial superiority in respect to Coloured children unjust and shameful. Entire passages of admiration are devoted to their innocence, closeness to nature, physical beauty and agility[38], but also his embarrassment when the two worlds come into direct contact, as in the following excerpt:

> So this boy who is unrelentingly kept all his life to the path of nature and innocence, who is poor and therefore also good, as the poor always are in fairy-tales, who is slim as an eel and quick as a hare and would defeat him with ease in any contest of swiftness of foot or skill of hand – this boy, who is a living reproof to him, is nevertheless subjected to him in ways that embarrass him so much that he squirms and wriggles his shoulders and does not want to look at him any longer, despite his beauty.[39]

He finds his situation equally puzzling when visiting his cherished farm, Voelfontein, and coming into contact with its Coloured workforce, which he finds simultaneously intriguing and inaccessible:

> If it is not embarrassing to have Ros's wife and daughter work in the house, he wants to ask, cooking meals, washing clothes, making beds, why is it embarrassing to visit them in their house? It sounds like a good argument, but there is a flaw in it, he knows. For the truth is that it *is* embarrassing to have Tryn and Lientjie in the house. He does not like it when he passes Lientjie in the passage and she has to pretend she is invisible and he has to pretend she is not there. He does not like to see Tryn on her knees at the washtub washing his clothes. He does not know how to answer her when she speaks to him in third person, calling him "*die kleinbaas*," the little master, as if he were not present. It is all deeply embarrassing.[40]

This feeling of shame is also present when he treats his friends to a birthday feast. The boy is initially proud as a result of his temporary affluence; "he feels princely, dispensing pleasures like this; the occasion would be a marvellous success, were it not spoiled by the ragged Coloured children standing in the window looking in on them"[41]. However, as time passes, his wealth becomes a source of shame. In the Coloured children's innocent faces, he "sees none of the hatred which, he is prepared to acknowledge, he and his friends deserve for having so much money while they are penniless"[42]. He also notices that, even though his boyhood is far from idyllic, these children appear to have no childhood at all. Their transition into adulthood, and into the servant class at that, is almost instantaneous:

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38 Cf. J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood…*, p. 60.

39 Ibidem, p. 61.

40 Ibidem, p. 86.

41 Ibidem, p. 72.

42 Ibidem.

> With Coloured people in general, and with the people of the Karoo in particular, he simply does not know when they cease to be children and become men and women. It seems to happen so early and so suddenly: one day they are playing with toys, the next day they are out with the men, working, or in someone's kitchen, washing dishes.[43]

The white population's stance towards the Coloured members of society is clearly visible in an incident occurring towards the end of the novel. Mr Golding, one of the protagonist's father's clients, arrives at the Coetzees' home, demanding money owed by the boy's father. John observes how, as a result of his father's debts, the Coloured man's social status rises. In the hope that he does not prosecute he is received in the front room, like all other callers, and served tea in the same tea service. However, after the whole ordeal is over his superiority disappears along with his presence in the house:

> After he has left there is a debate about what to do with the teacup. The custom, it appears is that after a person of colour has drunk from a cup the cup must be smashed. He is surprised that his mother's family, which believes in nothing else, believes in this.[44]

Finally, as an acceptable half-measure, the cup is bleached in order to save money. Similar examples of racial discrimination can be found in other works by Coetzee, for instance in *the Life and Times of Michael K*:

> There are farmers who beat their workers to death. There is a black girl who, accused of theft, is robbed of her clothes and painted with white paint.[45]

However, the Coloured population is not the most disadvantaged social group in Boyhood. The narrator clearly highlights the Coloureds' superiority over the Natives. At school the boy learns the Coloureds "were fathered by the whites, by Jan van Riebeeck, upon the Hottentots […] the land comes with them, is theirs, has always been"[46]. On the other hand, the Natives are described as "latecomers, invaders from the north"[47], men "without women, without children, who arrive from nowhere and can be made to disappear into nowhere"[48]. He draws a parallel between the plight of the natives and one of his favourite stories, a tale of three brothers. The third brother is "kind and honest and courageous […] the humblest and most derided"[49], while the other two brothers are "boastful, arrogant, uncharitable"[50]. At the close

43 Ibidem, p. 86.

44 Ibidem, p. 157.

45 H. Leusmann, op. cit., p. 60.

46 J.M. Coetzee, *Boyhood*…, p. 62.

47 Ibidem, p. 61.

48 Ibidem, p. 62.

49 Ibidem.

50 Ibidem.

of the story, the third brother is crowned prince. A similar image, albeit without the happy ending, can be found in the Coetzee's portrayal of South Africa:

> There are white people and Coloured people and the Natives, of whom the Natives are the lowest and most derided. The parallel is inescapable: the Natives are the third brother.[51]

The boy does not appear to accept this division and upon hearing his mother's admiration for the wisdom of an old Native man ("It is the only time he can remember her using the word wise"[52]), he is relieved at the possibility of others respecting them. He is puzzled by his supposed racial superiority and empathises with those of a different racial ethnicity.

Religion

If the surrounding racism puzzles the boy, the ever-present religious persecution completely baffles him. This problem is chiefly a result of his upbringing, since he has been raised without religion in a highly-devout culture. When pressured into revealing his religion at school, the boy states "Roman Catholic"[53], thereby picking his religion at random. His reasons, however, are far more concrete than they appear to be at first sight. He picks Catholicism because of his admiration for Rome, "because of Horatius and his two comrades, swords in their hands, crested helmets on their heads, indomitable courage in their glance, defending the bridge over Tiber against the Etruscan hordes"[54]. Since he knows nothing about Catholicism, he instantly becomes a target to "the menaces of the real Catholics"[55]. He has no wish to be Christian, because being Christian appears to mean "singing hymns and listening to sermons and then coming out to torment the Jews"[56]. The Jews do not persecute him, but they are, in turn, demonised by his relatives:

> The Catholic boys nag him and make sneering remarks, the Christians persecute him, but the Jews […] pretend not to notice. The Jews wear shoes too. In a minor way, he feels comfortable with the Jews. The Jews are not so bad. Nevertheless, with Jews one has to tread carefully. For the Jews are everywhere, the Jews are taking over the country. He hears this on all sides, but particularly from his uncles […] when they visit.[57]

In short, when it comes to religion, as with nationality and racial identity, John finds it difficult to fit into one unified social group. As a result, he creates his own set of principles:

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51 Ibidem.

52 Ibidem, p. 65.

53 Ibidem, p. 19.

54 Ibidem, p. 20.

55 Ibidem, p. 24.

56 Ibidem.

57 Ibidem, p. 21.

> He can think of nothing more heroic than holding a pass, nothing nobler than giving up one's life to save other people […]. That is who he would like to be: a hero. That is what proper Roman Catholicism should be about.[58]

He remains loyal to his own, idealised vision of Roman Catholicism, which further intensifies his departure from social norms.

As a result of these disparities, the boy is constantly bullied by the Afrikaans children. For instance, since he does not openly conform to the predominant religion in his area, Christianity, he is mistakenly labelled a Jew and harassed by the other boys: "«Jood!» an Afrikaans boy hisses at him as he passes: Jew! When they rejoin class, no one smiles."[59]

Perhaps as a result of this rejection, the protagonist devotes most of his time to solitary pastimes, most of which he enjoys in secrecy. This secretive nature leads to a type of a dual personality: in order to belong, John seems to be playing a part when in the company of others. This is observable, for instance, in his behaviour at home and at school. „At home he is an irascible despot, at school a lamb, meek and mild […]. By leading this double life he has created for himself a burden of imposture."[60]

Towards the end of the novel this duality, in addition to the boy's sense of estrangement, reaches its climax as the teenage protagonist is described as having an "ugly, black, crying, babyish core"[61] concealed within a toughened exterior.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the protagonist of J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* suffers from a sense of alienation within South African society due to his rejection of the accepted social norms; norms concerning chiefly the categories of nationality, race and religion. As a result of his bilingual upbringing and aversion towards the version of South African history propagated by the educational system, John develops a transnational sense of identity and longs to become British, but realises that this process can never be fully completed. He finds his supposed racial superiority, imposed by apartheid and prior policies of racial segregation, shameful and irrational and cannot comprehend the ubiquitous racial discrimination in South African society. Finally, as a result of being brought up in a secular family, John does not follow any religious doctrine and, as a result, is ostracized by his peers, who constitute the predominantly Christian religious majority.

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58 Ibidem, p. 25.

59 Ibidem, p. 19.

60 Ibidem, p. 13.

61 Ibidem, p. 112.

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Summary

The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of three issues – nationality, race and religion – on the life of John Coetzee, the child protagonist of J.M Coetzee's semi-autobiographical *Boyhood*: *Scenes from Provincial Life*. The article stipulates that the boy's sense of alienation within South African society is a direct result of his rejection of, respectively, nationality (due to his bilingual upbringing and affection for English history and language), race (the boy cannot comprehend the racial segregation imposed by policies of legislated racism and division) and religion (he is brought up in a secular family and, consequently, does not follow any religious doctrine in a highly devout, predominantly Christian society).